

Not Left Behind: Perspectives from Out-of-School Girls in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract- Despite considerable efforts to improve school enrolment among children, school attendance and completion rates in Sub-Saharan Africa remain low. Several barriers have been identified to hinder access to quality education for children in the country, including poverty, religious and cultural factors. ACE Charity, a non-governmental organization, implemented an alternative form of education among out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria, and received significantly positive reception and high participation from beneficiaries. This research was therefore being conducted to provide information on invisible barriers of school enrolment among out-of-school girls in Northern Nigeria and explore the high level of receptiveness to radio as an alternative form of education among girls in Northern Nigeria. A qualitative approach was chosen as the research method for this study, with semi-structured interviews with 100 female participants, purposively sampled, were conducted. Inclusion criteria were female participants who were out of school while ACE Radio School was implemented, and participated in ACE Radio School listening groups, or listened to the radio broadcasts through radio. The study showed that poverty and poor quality of government education were major deterrents to school enrolment in the region, while major motivation for partaking in the alternative education were the learning opportunities, the local language of instruction. The findings highlight that school enrolment will improve if free access to education and high quality of learning is free access to education is provided to girls living in Northern Nigeria.

Index Terms- Alternative education, , Northern Nigeria, Out-of-School Girls, School enrolment.

I. INTRODUCTION

At the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015, the United Nations member states met in a general assembly to set what is now the 2030 agenda, a set of ambitious goals and targets to leave no one behind, with the promise of ensuring that “all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment” [1]. The Goal 4 of the SDG suggests that there was immediate need to bridge the gap in education, stating that at the end of primary school, children should be able to read and write, as well as understand the basic concepts, in addition to high completion rates in primary and secondary schools without gender disparity. However, the world is now faced with the arduous challenge of meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the influence of a global pandemic, dwindling economic gains, and insecurity [2]. In 2020, the UN Secretary General report on the SDGs highlighted the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gains made in achieving the goal for quality education, stating that it has brought about a generational catastrophe [2].

For millions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, the pandemic only made the already fragile system even worse. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR, 2021) Report on Internally Displaced persons (IDPs) [3], there was a net increase of internal displacement in West and Central African Region to about 1.4 million IDPs owing to continued conflict and violence in the Sahel region, as well as the adverse effect of climate change. In Nigeria, the protracted crises in the North-east of the country have had a major impact on the socio-economic context of the region. Thus, people are faced with increasing economic burden – further plunging families into poverty, unstable political climate, unemployment, and an increased burden of the impact of climate change [4].

Despite considerable efforts to improve school enrolment among children, school attendance and completion rates in Sub-Saharan Africa remain low. According to UNICEF, Nigeria currently has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, with 10.5 million children estimated to be out-of-school before the pandemic [4]. Several barriers have been identified to hinder access to quality education for children in the country, including poverty, religious and cultural factors [5], however the current narrative in

Northern part of the country states that the insurgency, culture and religion is a major barrier to learning for girls [5]. ACE Radio School, an initiative to bridge the educational gap that existed as schools were shut down during the pandemic, began airing to populations in 8 states in Northwest and Northeast regions, including the Federal Capital Territory. The program aimed to target children in nursery and primary levels of education while also meeting the educational needs of children who had never attended school [6].

When schools resumed In 2021, ACE radio School aired, through radio broadcasts in Adamawa, Kano, Borno and Sokoto states to a new target audience - out-of-school children - during school hours. Additionally, in rural communities in Sokoto, Borno, Kano and Adamawa, out-of-school children were mobilised to form 'listening groups' to listen to ACE Radio School episodes, through a speaker. Program implementation data showed positive feedback and high level of receptiveness from the listeners [6], and highlighted the possibility that there may be invisible barriers of learning in these states, regardless of the insurgency. It also highlighted the potential of alternative forms of education in improving access to quality education among out-of-school girls in these states.

This research is therefore being conducted to provide information on invisible barriers of school enrolment among out-of-school girls in Northern Nigeria and explore the high level of receptiveness to radio as an alternative form of education among girls in Northern Nigeria. It is anticipated that evidence from this study will be used to promote school enrollment among girls in Northern Nigeria, as well as provide the basis for the standardisation of alternative forms of educational content delivery to reach the hard-to-reach children and ensure all children receive universal basic education.

II. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was chosen as the research method for this study; this would provide in-depth information and provide opportunity to explore other possible issues. Semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted. Inclusion criteria were female participants who were out of school while ACE Radio School was implemented, and participated in ACE Radio School listening groups, or listened to the radio broadcasts through radio, and had sent some sort of response to questions asked during broadcasts through SMS. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. In total, 100 girls were selected to participate in the study, Table 1 provides details of the participants, and location.

Data collection took place between September 2021 and December 2021. The Fatima Platform for remote data collection was used to schedule interviews, call participants and record interviews; interviews were stored on a secure server. The length of the interviews varied from participant to participant based on individual differences. Interviews were transcribed by the members of the research team.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded for analysis. Thematic analysis was used to code for and analyze the transcribed content. The codes represent keywords which capture the content in the text; codes were organized and categorized to form themes. Data interpretation was based on the themes that emerged from the codes that were applied, recurring themes were highlighted and similarities and differences in the data were captured. Informed consent was obtained from parents while informed assent was obtained from the adolescent girls. Both parents and participants were provided adequate information on the study and were assured of their willingness to participate in the study or otherwise. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study, as well as their right to not provide answers to questions that they deemed inappropriate. Participants were given advance notice of the interview and objectives of the interview. Signed consent forms were obtained and uploaded on the Fatima Platform and interviews were conducted upon the successful upload of consent forms. Prior to commencement of the virtual interview, another consent was obtained from the participants, through a restatement of rights to participate, confidentiality of interviews and freedom of withdrawal as well as consent to take digital records.

III. WRITE DOWN YOUR STUDIES AND FINDINGS

A. Description of the respondents

Results show that most of the respondents were between the ages of 12 and 17 years. There were 66 respondents from the Northeast (Borno and Adamawa States) and 34 from the Northwest (Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kano) regions. Most of the respondents had dropped out of school, while others had never attended school.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Number
Age Group 8 - 11 years	9

12 - 14 years	54
15 - 17 years	35
18 years and above	2
Respondents per State	
Adamawa	35
Borno	31
Kaduna	6
Kano	5
Sokoto	23

B. Exploring Experiences from Out-of-School Girls

Most of the respondents had never attended school, while those who attended dropped out at some point between primary and secondary schools. Very few stated that they had never attended school, while others dropped out of school at either the primary or secondary level.

State	Dropped Out	Never Attended
Adamawa	30	5
Borno	11	20
Kaduna	6	7
Kano	5	0
Sokoto	16	0

For most of the respondents interviewed, the lack of school fees or finance was a major challenge to enrolling or completing school.

“Well, I want to get enrolled, but there is no finance, that’s the case. Honestly there is no money in my household.” - 12-year-old girl, Sokoto

“Because we need money for school, and we were chased from school, our father does not have money, so I stopped.” ~ 15-year-old girl, Sokoto Nigeria

Some of the respondents were orphans and had no one able to enrol them in school.

“It is because I lost my dad, he wasn’t working, and I lost my mother, and she wasn’t working. I just wrote the common (Common Entrance Examination) only, I haven’t entered school.” - 11-year-old girl, Adamawa

There were some respondents who had no support from parents to enroll in school, due to their preconceived beliefs about formal school.

“Well, the reason is not honorable. Our father didn’t enroll us right from time. When we came back, I said, daddy put me in school, put me in school and he told me I will put you in, until I grew up. When I was growing up, he used to say school corrupts children... there are younger siblings, He didn’t put them, but he is talking about enrolling them” ~ 13-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria

Inadequate educational infrastructure and the lack thereof affects school enrolment, in addition, to lack of teaching staff to instruct students. Most of the respondents pointed out that teachers either do not come to school or are not motivated to teach the students.

“Because in a formal school, they don’t even teach properly, and children only go to play.” ~ 12-year-old girl, Sokoto, Nigeria

“I left school because our teachers don't come to school to teach us and there is no form of learning going on there. Meanwhile the schools we want, our parents cannot afford them” ~ 17-year-old girl, Sokoto, Nigeria

C. Motivations for ACE Radio School Participation

Motivations for participating in ACE Radio School were related to perceived benefits and expectations. Respondents were motivated by the opportunity to continue schooling, the fun and engaging learning through ACE Radio school, peers attending, or support from parents or guardians.

“The reason I listen to the radio school is because my younger brother and others were listening and I always sit with them, so I got motivated to listen too and to make use of it for all of us.” ~ 15-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria (Listening group)

“Well, I went to see our neighbor and heard them listening, so I went home and started listening too. I turned on my father's radio and we started listening to it at home with my younger sister” ~ 14-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria

“Because I want to become something and what is being taught is very useful for one's future life, so I kept listening” ~ 12-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria

The language of instruction, the mother tongue, was also another factor that motivated participation in the radio school.

“...Since the radio school is in Hausa, our mother tongue, you will understand whether or not you go to school. Since if you go to school, you will not be taught in Hausa only, they will include English, some will understand English, and others won't understand English. With the radio, even if you stay at home, you will understand, honestly” ~ 19-year-old girl, Kano, Nigeria (Listening group)

C. Benefits of ACE Radio School

Respondents expressed how the broadcasts were of benefit to them. Most respondents indicated that learning through ACE Radio School was fun, interesting, and engaging.

“The day I was walking to play, I saw some people being taught, they said we should start attending, they put on the radio, they talk and write, I felt good because I was not in school, and I got things out of it.” ~ 13-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria (Listening group)

“Ever since I started listening to the program, I've always felt like it's brightening my life” - 13-year-old, Borno, Nigeria

ACE Radio Broadcasts afforded opportunities for growth, to gain knowledge, and encourage formal school attendance.

“Well, I learnt English. You see, I didn't know how to write (letters) before, but I can now write to anyone. I enjoyed the radio school and I talk a lot about it and even in this town I think that it has gotten the attention of a lot of people.” ~ 15-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria (Listening group)

“I found it very useful, especially English language. I learned many things including making sentences, I know how they are written and in science I know many things about it too.” ~ 12 year old girl, Borno, Nigeria

“It was beneficial to me because when I come back, my grandmother, who I'm living with would ask me to tell her, she will be happy, and she would say that it is not in vain that I'm going there, I learn things. because she asked me, and I gave her answers.” ~ 12-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria (Listening group)

“It encouraged me to go to school” ~ 15-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria

D. Differences between ACE Radio School and Conventional schools

Respondents highlighted some differences with formal school learning. Respondents stated differences in commitment, free access, opportunity to engage with the instructor through feedback, and better grasp of concepts.

“We pay fees in formal school and don't pay in the other one. In the radio school, we get free books and we buy in formal school ~ 17-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria (Listening group)

“We get more attention from the radio school than in our formal schools, most of the time there is a lot of noise in the school and the teachers are not coming and it is hard to understand in formal school” ~ 16-year-old girl, Sokoto, Nigeria

Although the respondents found the method of delivery of content by ACE Radio School engaging and beneficial, some respondents highlighted several features they wished were present in the radio school. This included a wider scope of learning, and more amenities.

“In formal school, we were provided with knowledge, toys, swings and so on, as well as fan and light (electricity).” ~ 13-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria (Listening group)

“Some subjects are not available in radio schools, that are available in primary schools.” ~ 15-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria

E. Parental Support to Participate in ACE Radio School

Respondents stated that they were encouraged to participate in ACE Radio School, as parents or guardians provided radios or handheld devices. They also provided verbal encouragement to the children.

“Honestly my parents got me books and a pen. And whenever it’s time for the program, they sit me down and put on the radio for me to listen and write.” ~ 14-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria

“...If the radio does not have battery before I get it, she (mother) will give me her phone when it’s time and I return it when I’m done.” ~ 14-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria

“They supported me by saying when I go, I shouldn’t play considering I’m not in school I have to persevere and learn things from the radio” - 13-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria (Listening group).

F. Challenges faced with listening to ACE Radio School

Majority of the respondents reported facing no challenges with listening to ACE Radio School. However, due to societal and cultural expectations, some girls were required to complete chores at home or sell goods for money. Respondents who missed some lessons indicated that they are required to work either at home or in the farm or sell food or non-food items for money.

“Some days I was working and some days I was sent (on errands).” ~ 12-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria

“Well, sometimes I help our mother work, but I still listen even if I don’t pay attention, I’ll still turn it on, even if I don’t listen to all of it, but at least I got something.” ~ 19-year-old girl, Kano, Nigeria

In addition to work that hinders girls from participating in ACE Radio School, lack of radio was also a challenge that hindered girls from participating.

“When I didn’t have a radio, I go to my neighbours. Sometimes when I go, they say the radio is not on, I usually feel bad when this happens. God helped, I found my father’s spoilt radio and got it fixed and I started listening on my own” ~ 14-year-old girl, Borno, Nigeria

G. Recommendations to Improve Girl Child Education

The need to educate more children to acquire basic education has been seen as a matter of global urgency. The respondents recommended that tuition should be provided to those who are most vulnerable and unable to attend school, while others recommended parental sensitization, commitment from their peers, and teachers.

“We want to go back to school, we would need our school fees to be paid” ~ 12-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria

“They have to commit themselves to school, to reading and learning” ~ 12-year-old girl, Adamawa, Nigeria

“What needs to be done to enable girls attend school is to first talk to parents to allow girls get good education because there is no benefit in hawking” ~ 12-year-old girl, Sokoto, Nigeria

“I want teachers to be more committed in teaching. Honestly that will draw the attention of those who are not interested in school. You see ACE Radio School started and it has encouraged more people to attend school and continuity will make more people interested in learning.” ~ 16-year-old girl, Sokoto, Nigeria

IV. DISCUSSION

This study was conducted following evidence regarding the high level of receptiveness of ACE Radio School in Northeastern and North-western States in Nigeria. ACE Charity was concerned with reaching as many children as possible with educational instruction following the closure of schools during the pandemic. Radio broadcast of instructional content was favoured to ensure that more children can be reached especially children who had no access to school before the pandemic or had dropped out of school for any

number of reasons, in addition, children who were attending ACE Radio School listening groups would be ensured continuity with learning. This study captured participants' perspectives regarding their experience with ACE Radio School while the results obtained are discussed.

Evidence from the study shows that among the out-of-school girls interviewed, most had dropped out of school, while others reported having never attended school. Lack of finance to pay for school by parents was identified by most respondents as a major factor limiting school attendance, this has been shown to be made worse by prevailing economic or humanitarian conditions in a place which predisposes girls to face disproportionate challenges in the face of crises including but not limited to gender-based violence and child labour, early marriage. A similar study by Alat and Alat in 2011 [7] found that although government schools attracted little to no tuition fees, yet there are direct costs towards learners and households that could be burdensome for poor households. In addition, they also found that girls were required to fulfil duties required of them to complete at home. In the absence of humanitarian crises, negative economic situations could overwhelm parents leading to considering marrying off their daughters as means to secure their futures, resulting in girls being taken out of schools [8]. Another major factor identified in this study to limit school attendance was loss of parents, conflict is one of many factors that could make children orphans. Orphans are vulnerable to several challenges including lack of access to education, gender, and sexual based violence, among others [9]. In addition, some of the respondents indicated not being enrolled in school, due to cultural inclinations and the idea that schooling leads to the corruption of the mind. Finally, poor educational infrastructure was identified as a challenge to attending school, coupled with the lack of qualified teachers in schools.

Following the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in school closures, the need for innovative ways to bridge the gap created gave birth to ACE Radio school, with children who were already enrolled as well as out-of-school children reached equally. Respondents expressed excitement and delight towards ACE Radio school, having stumbled on programming either through referral or while with peers who were also listening. Respondents stated how participating in ACE Radio School improved their learning, gave them confidence, introduced new concepts they hadn't learnt before; these resonated with the expectations that respondents had towards ACE Radio School.

ACE Radio School brought learning closer to the girls who now see an opportunity to be empowered and to gain skills. Differences between ACE Radio School and Conventional schools were explored with respondents, many of whom indicated that the radio broadcasts gave them the opportunity to learn, unlike conventional schools where minimal learning took place. Other advantages of the radio school were free access to learning, and the ability to listen to instruction in their native language of Hausa. On the other hand, respondents identified that there was no room for social interaction compared with conventional schools where they have access to toys and other play equipment. They also identified that only a few subjects were available on the radio broadcasts.

Despite the ease of access to instruction through radio, respondents indicated facing challenges accessing broadcasts, one of which is the expectation of girls to meet all necessary work at home before attending as well as responding to errands or hawking, all of which could result in missing broadcasts. It was also identified that some girls go to neighbor's houses to listen to broadcasts. In a similar study by Barnett and colleagues [9], they identified that some parents did not allow their children to attend listening groups, with higher attendance recorded for boys than girls due to reasons related to increased responsibility for household chores, and safety concerns. On the other hand, however, some respondents reported that they were supported by their parents to listen to broadcasts, by providing writing materials, as well as radio or mobile devices.

The result from the study suggests some implications for implementing educational interventions through remote means:

- Most of the respondents pointed out some difference between radio school and conventional school, noting the absence of social interaction through Radio. Live panel discussion after each broadcast has been recommended to engage with listeners [10].
- Study participants made positive remarks regarding the appropriateness of the instruction language which enables them to understand instruction. Future programming can build on this while also encouraging literacy through practice and other interactive means. In addition, thought should be given to include additional subjects as pointed out by some of the participants.

V. LIMITATIONS

While undertaking this study, the following limitations were encountered which are acknowledged, Purposive techniques were adopted in this study to recruit participants. This was necessary based on willingness to participate in the study and age of respondents. Also, the study used remote data collection methods to collect data from respondents, which required the use of mobile devices from parents or guardians. The possibility of preventing interference by parents or guardians could not be ascertained.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore the factors that affect school enrolment and retention among out-of-school girls in Northern Nigeria and determining the factors that influenced the acceptance of an alternative form of education among them. The findings highlighted that unlike the usual narrative of religion or culture being the major deterrent to education for girls, other factors play a more significant role. These factors are poverty and the low quality of education in public or government schools. Alternatively, the free access to education, high quality of education provided by ACE Radio School proved as facilitators for the acceptance of an alternative form of education among the out-of-school girls.

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